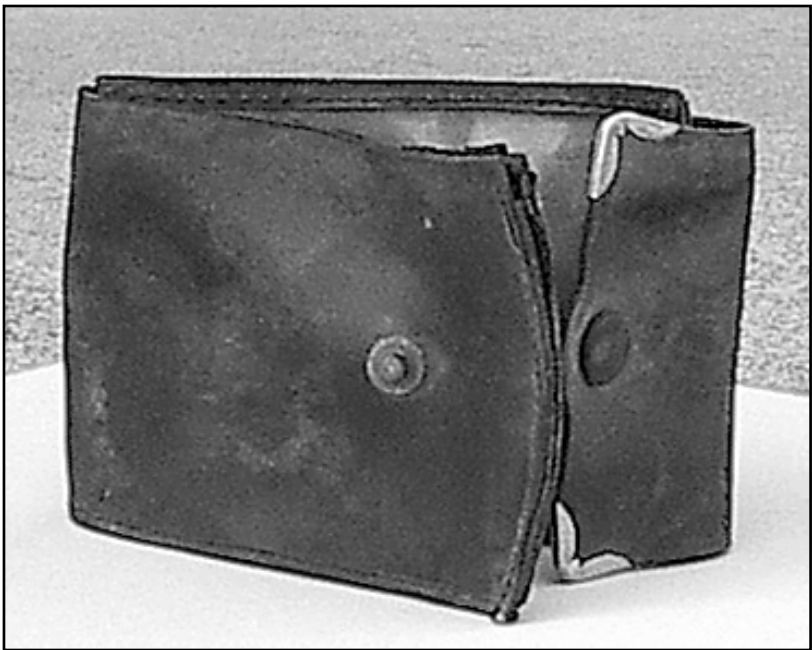


You never know what you might find in an old Camp Roberts barracks



This wallet containing this photograph was found stashed in a heating duct in one of the barracks at Camp Roberts. Sometimes the wallets and the contents can be returned to the former owner or to their family.



Lost treasures tell forgotten history of Camp Roberts

By Lisa Cooksey

Camp Roberts was built in 1941 as a temporary post intended to house and train soldiers preparing for World War II. It was built to serve five years. Over sixty years later, Camp Roberts is the California National Guard's largest training center and is host to over 300,000 training mandays annually from all services of the military.

The Camp Roberts' Facilities Modernization Program calls for the demolition of the old World War II era buildings. Unlike many of their contemporaries, the buildings of Camp Roberts have been spared demolition by traditional faster destruction methods, such as the wrecking ball or by burning during training by local fire departments, and are carefully and methodically taken apart.

This is partially due to asbestos contamination and lead based paint. Workers and soldiers occasionally stumble upon artifacts and other memorabilia that tell a story of Camp Roberts' earlier days. Sometimes something more than dust falls out. Considered artifacts representing Camp Roberts' earlier days, cans and bottles are typical of materials recovered from heating ducts. But not all the time.

The Fort Hunter Liggett Police Department provides police services under contract with Camp Roberts and is where most found personal property with identification is turned-in.

Sergeant Gary Huff, a military veteran and a retired police officer from the nearby Paso Robles Police Department, said that it is not unusual at all for all kinds of property, including wallets, to be recovered from heating ducts, underneath staircases, or between walls.

He recounted an interview he had with someone whose wallet he

found in a building being demolished in the 7000-area. The victim, a Korean War-era veteran who was at Camp Roberts in the early 1950's for a school, told about a more wild-and-wooly active Army Camp Roberts.

Through this and other interviews with veterans whose wallets were recovered at Camp Roberts, Huff learned it was a fairly common crime for wallets to be stolen from GI's who had been perhaps a little more trusting than they should have been.

A surprising number of wallets contain the owner's original Social Security card or an actual name, making it easier to locate the owner or their next-of-kin.

When they are located, most veterans want their old wallets back and Huff returns them at his personal expense as his own way of honoring the service of a fellow veteran. With many in their 70's and 80's, perhaps when these veterans of a long-ago era put "eyes-on" the yellowed papers and faded photographs, they are instantly transported to a time when they too were "young and dumb" and were out to protect the world.

And for those who survive a veteran, to hold those yellowed papers and faded photographs is to be instantly reminded again of a loving husband, father, brother, or son – and see into a time few men who "did their two years and got out" rarely spoke about.

Wallets that do not contain even the most basic of information, those whose owners are deceased with no surviving family, or those whose owners just do not want them back, are still not forgotten. These wallets are placed with the post museum.

The Camp Roberts Historical Museum houses other artifacts recovered from demolished build-

ings, such as cans, bottles, or articles of uniform. The museum and its annex also house artifacts of obsolete technology, such as Camp Roberts' last manual telephone switchboard (more commonly known as a "cord board," it was replaced by an automated switching system.

Camp Roberts presently utilizes a state-of-the-art digital electronic telephone and computer network systems), and early and long-obsolete telecommunications equipment from Camp Roberts' high-tech tenant, the U.S. Army Satellite Communications Station.

The museum also houses treasures found in long-abandoned buildings that defy explanation as to how they came to Camp Roberts. Chief among these is a footlocker recently discovered collecting dust in a storage room.

The footlocker contained reels of Army training films from the 1950's. There were also several reels of film, apparently of the California National Guard 40th Infantry Division's involvement in Korea, including extraordinarily rare footage of the Division's construction of a school for orphans at Kapyong which still survives and serves that community to this day. Equally rare, footage of movie star Marilyn Monroe entertaining Division soldiers in Korea.

Recognizing that time and poor storage conditions were probably not kind to these films, MATES technician and photographer/video-grapher Staff Sgt. Franco Federici worked with television station KSBY of San Luis Obispo, Calif., to quickly transfer the film to a digital electronic format. This effort came not a moment too soon and was truly an "all-or-nothing" event, as the images literally flaked away from the film as they flashed into the digital recorder that one last time.

It's only through the three decades of painstaking diligence of Master Sgt. Retired Albert E. Davis that treasures entrusted with the Camp Roberts Historical Museum allow current and future Camp Roberts soldiers and visitors a peek into the life of a typical soldier, 50- and 60-years removed.

The museum founder passed away July 25, 2002.

May Al rest in peace knowing that a small group of dedicated volunteers, comprised mostly of current and former soldiers and employees of the post, are dedicated to preserving not only the installation's history but Al Davis' legacy.

The Camp Roberts Historical Museum is located in Building 114 and is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Thursdays and Saturdays. Call 805-238-8288 or go to www.calguard.ca.gov/cprbts.



In February 1954, Marilyn Monroe, during her honeymoon with Joe DiMaggio, decided to drop in on soldiers in Korea. One of her performances was for the 40th Division, California Army National Guard.

LTC Nickels offers 'Heads Up'

As many California Army National Guardsmen have learned, be nice to the guy working next to you, he may be your commanding officer some day.

That's exactly what happened to David Nickels. He went from being an enlisted tank mechanic in MATES at Camp Roberts to being its commanding officer.

LTC Nickels, 45, began his military career back in 1975 when he enlisted in the United States Army. After five years of active duty, and reaching the rank of sergeant, he was discharged in 1980 and joined the California Army National Guard in 1983. After serving as a sergeant with the 951st Maintenance Company, he went to the California Military Academy Officer Candidate Program and became Second Lieutenant assigned to the Ordnance Corp and was actually sent back to Camp Roberts to serve as an intern at the facility.

After serving as commanding officer with a number of California Army National Guard units and several staff assignments, he returned to Camp Roberts, even though he is still the commander of the 746th Quartermaster Battalion in Van Nuys.

The Sacramento native said, "I love this job and I love the area. The job up in Sacramento (where he served with State Area Command) was fulfilling, there was never a dull moment as it would be with any large headquarters, but with this job I can focus my energy on a product and procedures where it is more of a leadership position versus a staff position up in headquarters.

"I really like this," he said. "It's great."

Nickels purchased a house in Paso Robles and has moved his wife, Carol, and daughter, Valerie, from the Sacramento area to the Central Coast. "Paso is great," he remarked. "When I lived here before I liked it then, but I think it has improved. When I lived here 15 years ago I don't remember the wine industry being as big as it

is. There just seems to be so much more there (Paso Robles) now."

Being from the Central Valley, Nickels said he knows about heat and humidity but he likes the dryer heat of this area. "I prefer hot to cold. What I really like about this is the cool-off at night. We don't get that out in the valley where it stays hot."

Nickels has the advantage of having worked on the equipment, then serving as an intern supervisor at the facility, so as its commander he knows what he wants to improved.

"Improvements are a continuous process," he said. "The guys out here do an excellent job. Facility wise, there's always expansion, you grow. There's some new structures here since I was here last but we still have people working in buildings constructed in World War II. They have been maintained but it would be nice to get them a new facility, so, in some year, we'll get a new building.

"All in all, there's always room for improvement," he added. "I can't say we're perfect."

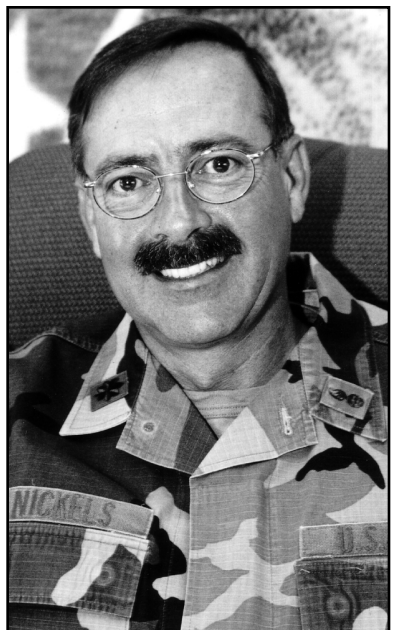
With the heightened security, September 11, and the possibility of going to war, has military tasking changed at the facility?

"Security wise, yes. There have been some security procedures implemented. There's a higher focus on the readiness of the equipment," he replied. "

While the work force at MATES has grown Nickels prefers to think of it as being more "focused."

"It's kind of back to the basic mission. The interest in readiness at the leadership levels at headquarters and the Department of the Army has increased obviously. Our job is more focused. The people out here work hard, and they always have, but readiness is the yardstick now."

While units from California Army National Guard and the surrounding communities have been activated, all they have taken with them are their basic loads, such as uniforms and small weapons,



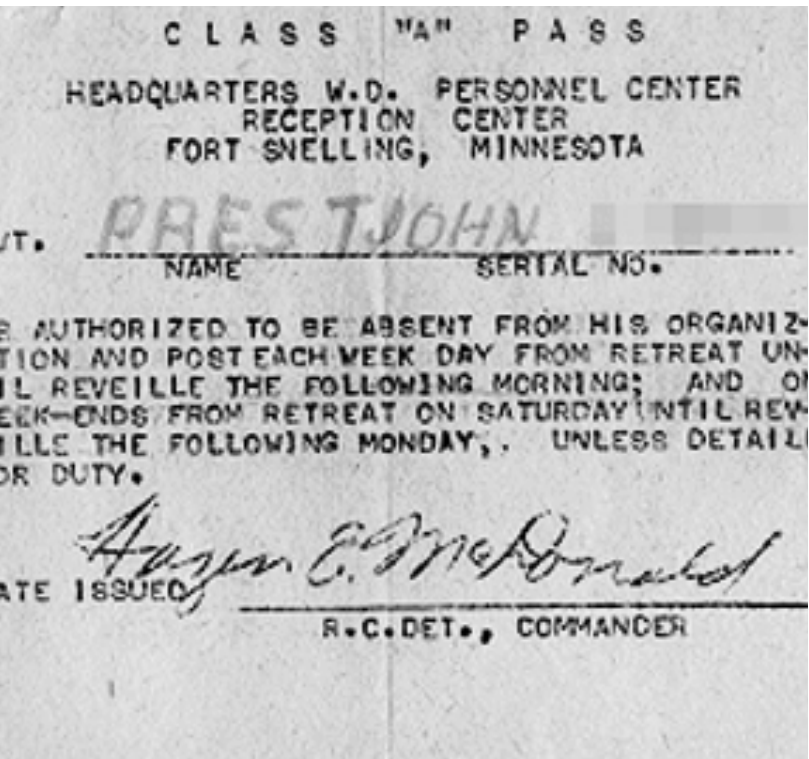
LTC Nickels replaced Gen. Gong as commander of Manuver Area Training Equipment Site.

"We have not deployed combat vehicles," he said, "with activated units. Their equipment remains with the Guard, here on station, still supported and maintained at a high readiness level.

Nickels, who was promoted to LTC in 2000, said he would like to stay at Camp Roberts "as long as they will let me."

Does he miss working on tanks? That question brought some laughter. "I'll date myself. The last tank I worked on was the M48A5, so it's been awhile. There's been three generations of tanks that have come through here since I turned wrenches on them. The actual job itself, yeah I miss it a little bit but I kind of like this one more. I don't get as dirty."

LTC Nickels has received three Army Commendation Medals, three Army Achievement Medals, Army Good Conduct Medal, Army Reserve Component Achievement Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Army Service Medal, and the Army Reserve Components Overseas Training Ribbon.



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